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SUBJECT: ORISSA POST VIOLENCE - SECURITY, RECONCILIATION AND
ELECTIONS

REF: A. NEW DELHI 2789

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Orissa state government is currently engaged in ensuring security, coordinating relief efforts and facilitating reconciliation in Kandhamal district. The government reports 40 deaths and 134 injuries statewide in the violence that began on August 23 with the murder of Hindu religious leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. The police arrested more than 1,200 people and have opened almost 1,000 criminal cases, although the killers of the Hindu religious leader have yet to be named. An estimated 9,500 individuals remain in temporary camps, wary of returning to their damaged properties and their once-friendly neighbors. The state has improved its cooperation and outreach with non-government organizations (NGOs) in delivering aid. Government officials, community members and religious leaders cite the perceived abuse of government affirmative action programs and socioeconomic differences as explanatory causes of the violence that has played out along ethnic and religious lines. The government's response to the Kandhamal communal violence and its underlying causes will be an issue in the upcoming state and national elections anticipated for Spring 2009.

¶2. (U) Poloff and PolFSN traveled to Bhubaneswar, Orissa from November 20 - 22 and met with government officials, politicians, NGOs, religious organizations and journalists to prepare this report. The statistics are drawn from the Orissa government's report for the Ministers of Agriculture, Social Justice and Tribal Affairs who visited the state from November 17 - 19 to assess rehabilitation and reconciliation efforts.

¶3. (SBU) On August 23 unidentified individuals killed Hindu religious leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati in the Kandhamal district of Orissa. The act unleashed a wave of revenge killings, assaults and property destruction in the district, with a few incidents located in surrounding districts. According to widely-accepted government statistics, 40 people died and 134 were injured - both Kandh (a tribe) and Pano (a caste) and Christian and Hindu, although more than 80 percent of the attacks were against Christian entities. The majority of attacks occurred within the first week of violence when local police were unable to control the situation and before reinforcements from the central government, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), had arrived on the fifth day. Sporadic violence continued until mid-October, by which time the state government had re-established law and order in the district. The Supreme Court has ordered the CRPF to remain in Orissa until the end of 2008; however, state government officials suggested that they will be asked to remain until the completion of next

spring's elections.

The State Government's Initial Delayed Response

¶4. (SBU) According to police and state government officials, the state's initial law and order response was hampered by ineffective transportation and communications and the delayed arrival of the CRPF. Kandhamal is a remote hilly, forested district of approximately 650,000 inhabitants with a very low population density - one third of the state average. At times during the violence, villagers cut down trees and established temporary road blocks to delay the police's response. It remains unclear why the CRPF took so long to arrive. According to parliamentarian Jay Panda, a member of the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) party, the state requested CRPF deployment from the Union Home Ministry on the first day of the crisis; however, it took more than five days for the force to arrive. Furthermore, several media contacts suggested that the former Director General of Police had not been fully engaged on the issue due to his pending retirement at the end of the year.

New Personnel - New Direction

¶5. (SBU) Since the religious violence began, the government has accepted the early retirement of the Director General of Police, transferred the district police superintendent and collector and appointed a special civil servant advisor to reside in Kandhamal and coordinate reconstruction and address improper land acquisition. Relief organizations and media sources generally regard the new officials as "impartial, honest and effective." In a November 20 meeting with Poloff, the new Director General of Police, Manmohan Praharaj, credited a strategy focusing on "mobility and communications" in helping him to re-establish law and order in the district. After assuming charge on September 30, he ordered a police presence, outfitted with radios and motorbikes, every 10 kilometers along the road to ensure that police were informed and could respond to any incident.

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¶6. (SBU) After halting the violence, Praharaj's focus turned towards arresting the perpetrators of violence, facilitating residential return and preventing future civil unrest. According to him, the police have detained more than 800 individuals; but it is unclear to what degree they are involved with criminal acts. The state government has yet to name Laxmanananda's killers, a key demand of the Hindu religious organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its coalition partner Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Noting the sensitive nature of the killers' identity the then Home Secretary refused to provide Poloff with any information on the arrested persons, including any potential group affiliation whether Maoists, Christian or possibly both.

NGOs Work with Government to Deliver Relief

¶7. (SBU) The state government has allocated funds to compensate next of kin and repair damaged houses, businesses and places of worship. However, relief organizations would like to see a more robust housing compensation program, to include a cash-for-work allocation. While the state government originally prevented relief organizations from working in the district due to security concerns, they resumed their work in November. Archbishop of Bhubaneswar-Cuttack Raphael Cheenath told Poloff that several relief organizations are currently discussing with the state government a public-private partnership to supplement the government-provided home relief compensation plan.

Residents Reluctant to Return

¶8. (SBU) While the government cites declining camp population figures in Kandhamal, currently 9,500 down from a high of 24,000, as proof that residents are returning, several relief and Christian organizations allege former residents have simply left the district and/or state. Politicians hold out promise for village "peace committees" that will allow villagers to

reconcile with one another but some relief workers note that the reconciliation process will require time and additional resources. One NGO, Catholic Relief Services, is preparing such a project proposal for donor consideration.

Affirmative Action, Class and Identity in Kandhamal

¶19. (SBU) Mainstream interlocutors were quick to identify the existence and possible abuse of affirmative action policies as an underlying explanation for the violence. The district's population are divided into two ethnic groups: the Kandhas and the Panas. Both the Kandhas, as a scheduled tribe, and the Panas, as a scheduled caste, enjoy privileged positions according to the Indian constitution. One's scheduled tribe or caste designation may affect one's economic rights, for instance only tribals can buy tribal land without special permission. Political rights are also affected as a portion of parliamentary and assembly seats are reserved for scheduled castes or tribes. The Kandhamal parliamentary seat had been reserved for scheduled caste, i.e. a Pana, in the majority Kandh district; however, according to BJD party and media contacts, it will be changed to an open seat for the upcoming election as a result of a unrelated national nonpartisan review and redistricting process.

¶10. (SBU) Under the Indian constitution, when one converts to Christianity, they lose their right to claim scheduled caste status and are no longer eligible for scheduled caste economic and political benefits, as Christianity does not recognize a caste system. While most Kandhas are Hindus who follow their own indigenous culture, a majority of Panas are Christians. As missionaries have increased their work in the district, in the last forty years the Christian population in Kandhamal has grown from five to twenty percent, mostly among the Panas. To complicate the matter further, some Panas who converted to Christianity continue to claim to be tribal Kandhas, as they speak the language Kui - thereby reaping the political and economic benefits from both government affirmative action schemes.

¶11. (SBU) Socioeconomic inequities also explain the violence. The Panas have traditionally been the interlocutors for the Kandhas with the outside world serving as their traders, servants and slaves. The Panas' increased share of economic activity is correlated with their educational advances, thanks in part to the role of Christian missionary organizations. The Kandhas resent the economic rise and empowerment of this traditional servant class and alleged misappropriation of tribal lands.

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¶12. (SBU) Hindu religious leader Laxmanananda began working with the tribal community in Kandhamal district in 1967. He aroused the ire of some of the Pana community as he empowered the tribals, who represent a majority of the population, to assert their political and economic rights - at the expense of the Pana community. Critics contend that he was personally not interested in the plight of the tribals as such, but more concerned about traditional Hindutva policies - dampening the spread of Christianity in the district and maintaining a Hindu majority state. There is a general perception in the population that while Maoists may have assassinated Laxmanananda, some Christians may have been involved in the planning as they had been previously implicated in several of the nine attempts on his life. Christian leaders privately admitted to Poloff that they cannot rule out a Christian/Maoist linkage, as the Maoists have made inroads amongst some of the Christian population in the inland laying districts. As the President of the YMCA Bhubaneswar noted to Poloff, "some Christian youth have gone off to the jungles" and they are not there to scavenge for food.

The BJD - Caught in the Middle

¶13. (SBU) The senior coalition partner in the state government, the BJD, has had to delicately balance the needs of various local stakeholders for justice, security, rehabilitation and

reconciliation - against the backdrop of the upcoming state and national elections, scheduled together for Spring 2009. Elements of the Christian community are upset about the government's failure to provide for their security in the immediate aftermath of the attacks; however, they are now encouraged by the government's recent good-faith rehabilitation efforts. The Hindu religious organization VHP would like to see their religious leader's killers brought to justice and the alleged abuses of the affirmative action programs curbed. Even the BJP has distanced itself from its coalition partner and supported a large VHP rally on November 15 in Bhubaneswar calling for the identification of Laxmanananda's murderers and endorsing the VHP's call for a general December 25 strike. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has publicly spoken out against the strike and parliamentarian Panda and the former Home Secretary T. K. Mishra privately told Poloff that the state government would not allow it to proceed.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) The state government's initial response to the communal violence in Kandhamal was insufficient in addressing the law and order situation in the district. Prompted by the central government's discussion of President's Rule, the unfavorable international media attention and the Supreme Court's October 22nd ruling, the state government beefed up security personnel, announced rehabilitation schemes and worked with NGOs to deliver relief. The state government's limited police presence, especially its lack of mobility and communications, was quickly overwhelmed by the events. Its dependency on the central government to restore civil order has also prompted state officials to consider strengthening state resources in other areas, such as the establishment of a paramilitary unit of tribals to combat the Maoist threat. In this election year the BJD, while favored to return to government, is engaged in a delicate dance. It wants to demonstrate its secular appeal by addressing the needs of the displaced victims who are mostly Christian Pana, but is also eager to maintain its wide populist appeal in a state that is 95 percent Hindu. Its coalition partner, the BJP, will continue to politicize the communal violence in Kandhamal to mobilize its Hindu base. Interlocutors were unanimous that Kandhamal would remain an issue up until the elections and perhaps longer. The moderate voter turnout (50 percent) for the December 2nd Kandhamal municipal elections and lack of associated violence is one encouraging sign for reconciliation efforts in the state and the district.

PAYNE